AN ESSAY ON THE TOLERATION OF PAPISTS.

Terrorem tenebraſque neceſſe 'ſt
Non radii ſolis, neque lucida tela diei
Diſcutiant, ſed naturæ ſpecies ratioque.

LUCRET.

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IT is remarkable, that the Popiſh religion hath been a ſubject of abhorrence, in every Proteſtant country, ever ſince the Reformation. Even thoſe doctrines and ceremonies, which would otherwiſe have been received by the more enlightened and rational part of mankind, as conducive to the general welfare, or at leaſt to the harmleſs amuſement of the people, have been entertain-

ed with almoſt an equal abhorrence with the moſt ridiculous and ſuperſtitious extravagancies. The philoſopher, whoſe enlarged mind perceives the true happineſs of all mankind, and whoſe univerſal benevolence embraces them with an equal affection, ſounds the alarm to the nations of the earth, againſt the prieſthood of every religion; and even wiſhes an abolition of religious inſtitutions. But all that can be advanced againſt prieſts and religion, can anſwer no rational purpoſe. It is oppoſing the ſtrongeſt propenſity, next to ſelf-preſervation, that nature has implanted in man. The ſolemn exclamations of philoſophers, the laughter of the witty, and even the arts of the ſtateſman, are all in vain.

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The ſeeds of religion are too deeply rooted in the human heart: man can never live in a world of miſery, without the conſolations of religion, and the hopes of future felicity. It is therefore manifeſt, that true wiſdom will never attempt to aboliſh religion; but to prevent thoſe pernicious abuſes to which it is ſubject. The cauſe of this general exclamation, ſometimes againſt religion itſelf, and almoſt always againſt every inſtitution of prieſts, has been that enormous abuſe, which was made of the beſt religion by the court and biſhop of Rome. It is affirmed, that the clergy muſt always be impelled by the ſame invariable motives; and that we muſt again be expoſed to their former uſurpa-

tions, by affording them any encouragement.

I never wiſh to ſee a repetition of the ſlaviſh ſuperſtitions and encroachments of Rome; but, I think that the ſituation of the world is not at preſent expoſed to them. The preſent face of Europe is different from that barbarous and gloomy region, where thoſe deep foundations were laid for ſuperſtition and prieſtcraft. Commerce, refinement, and philoſophy, have diſpelled that general darkneſs, which concealed their hateful deſigns; and the ſtupendous edifice is crumbling faſt away, and totters on the brink of deſtruction.

Let us examine a detail of particulars: Europe is, at preſent, populous and wealthy, from the induſtry and improvements

improvements of later times. The inferior ranks of men have, in every country, acquired a conſiderable portion of the national property. Commerce has produced this mighty and beneficial effect; and inſpired the ſentiments of liberty, where they could never have ariſen from the general principles of the government. For, property being once acquired, the owners having experienced its uſes and pleaſures, are ſo tenacious of their right, that it is not in the power of tyranny to wreſt it from them. Hence the moderation of the preſent monarchies of Europe.

And, as commerce has inſpired the ſpirit of national liberty, it is attended likewiſe with a generous freedom of ſentiment, from the opportunities which it

affords mankind of obſerving the various inſtitutions and religions of the world; and from that general converſation and interchange of opinions, as well as that complying diſpoſition, which neceſſarily takes place among the retainers of trade. When they obſerve that the religious inſtitutions and opinions of the world have always varied with the face and nature of the country, and that all of them are attended with pernicious effects of different kinds, while yet they contribute in different degrees, and in different ways, to promote the welfare of ſociety; and when they are obliged from intereſt to pay a moſt patient and obliging attention to the different opinions of thoſe with whom they are concerned on commercial accounts;

counts; their minds muſt gradually enlarge, till, at laſt, they have embraced more liberal ſentiments, and learnt to deſpiſe thoſe narrow bigots, who would confine the care and affection of Heaven to ſome favourite ſect or peculiar race of men, or ſuppoſe that a juſt and merciful God would devote to eternal miſery ſo great a portion of the ſpecies, merely for entertaining religious opinions, which it was out of their power to help, on account of their different educations, and the different public inſtitutions of their country.

Thus commerce having produced an univerſal moderation, if not a total indifference, the attachment of all to their former religious tenets muſt wear away, and the clergy muſt utterly loſe their ancient hold on the minds of the people.

people. We may ſay, that this is the caſe with Europe at preſent, whoſe inhabitants are ſcarcely attached to any particular forms of religion, from any other principle than the love of order and decency; and are ſo circumſtanced, by means of commerce, that it is impoſſible for the prieſthood to eſtabliſh a perfect uniformity of faith, or even to preſerve their ancient forms, but as the people ſubmit to them through a habit of acquieſcence, for the public tranquillity. This gradual decay is more dangerous to the intereſts of Popery than the furious efforts of bigotted Hugonots.

Indifference become univerſal, it is impoſſible for thoſe who govern the world by the ſuperſtitious opinions of men, to play one half of a nation againſt

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the other, when it is forſaking the eſtabliſhed religion. Thus a generous freedom of ſentiment, with civil and religious liberty, ariſes from commerce:—and, thus Europe, having acquired this invaluable bleſſing from the natural operation of commerce, which has rendered her wealthy and populous, its inhabitants are at preſent divided into various ſubordinate ranks, poſſeſſed of various degrees of property, and ſwayed in their opinions by its various forms; and likewiſe reſolved to preſerve it from invaſion, whether it be from the hand of power and oppreſſion, or from the hypocriſy and cant of religion. The commerce of the world having leſſened their attachment to their ancient opinions, whenever intereſt and religion interfere, the former will always

ways prevail, till at length it becomes an eſtabliſhed maxim, that the claims of religion are groundleſs, if they do not contribute to the general welfare of ſociety. The ſale of indulgences will abate; and excommunication will loſe its force, as the ſecular power, partaking of the general indifference, and purſuing a ſeparate intereſt, ever oppoſite to that of a powerful prieſthood, will refuſe its uſual aſſiſtance.

In this ſituation of ſociety, there muſt be numbers of ingenious and inquiſitive men, poſſeſſed of independent fortunes, who devote their time and leiſure to learning and philoſophy, inſtead of the purſuits and intereſts of the world. Theſe obſerving the conduct and behaviour of thoſe who govern the world by the terrors

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of religion, and by civil reſtraints, and examining the ſource, the nature and extent of every divine and moral obligation, communicate their diſcoveries to the world, and confirm thoſe free and generous ſentiments, which the public has already conceived.

This muſt always be an agreeable employment; and many, of courſe, will engage in it. The clouds of ſuperſtition will therefore vaniſh, and reaſon triumph in the blaze of day.

Thus, while the general commerce of Europe continues; (and it will continue, in all probability, to very remote generations: until ſome power has obtained an univerſal empire, like that of ancient Rome; and that empire is overturned by ſome ſavage and ſuperſtitious race of barbarians, who

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will eſtabliſh in it their own religious and civil inſtitutions, preferring the gloom of ſuperſtition and ignorance to the pleaſing and chearful lights of learning and philoſophy;) I ſay, while the general commerce of Europe continues, with its infinite train of bleſſings, it is evident we can never be expoſed to the dangerous encroachments of prieſtcraft.

If this be the preſent ſituation of Europe, it is in a higher degree the preſent ſituation of England. And, conſidering that our connections with Rome are entirely broke, and that the papal ſupremacy has long been an exploded doctrine: conſidering that the artful Jeſuits are now ſuppreſſed, and that his Holineſs is for ever deprived of thoſe who were moſt devoted to his

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ſervice: and, conſidering that he cannot eſtabliſh any new inſtitution for a ſimilar purpoſe, becauſe monkiſh fraternities are repugnant to the general ſpirit of the times; Why ſhould we dread the encroachments of Popery? Away with ſuch vain apprehenſions! Let the Engliſh catholics enjoy the protection of government, and you ſhall find them loyal and uſeful ſubjects; as indeed they have long diſtinguiſhed themſelves, under the ſevereſt oppreſſions and hardſhips.

Was there a better man in England than the late Duke of Norfolk? I forbear to mention living names.

If their ſouls revolt at the dreadful alternative of Heaven and Hell, and hope for a milder fate, why ſhould we refuſe them the modeſt conſolation

of Purgatory? They believe that they muſt endure there a ſpecies of puniſhment, proportioned to their crimes; and that their puniſhment will be continued till their ſouls are ſufficiently purified for the regions of happineſs.

This will contribute to the advancement of virtue, and promote the welfare of ſociety as well as the more dreadful horrors of eternal damnation. Extreme unction, the ſeven ſacraments, the awful ſolemnity of ancient forms, are very harmleſs things. That pernicious claim of the Pope's ſupremacy over the Engliſh monarchy is aboliſhed for ever.

Thoſe more trifling opinions and ſuperſtitious obſervances, which have been preſerved in the ſhades of concealment,

cealment, as ſoon as they appear abroad, will vaniſh through the light of philoſophy. Away, then, with our vain apprehenſions!

However, that we may further confirm the opinion which is here advanced, let us review the ages of antiquity. When the foundations of the papal authority were laid, the nations of Europe were compoſed of ſavage barbarians, who had been led away from their native foreſts, with the love of conqueſt and plunder;—and, having deſtroyed the learning and philoſophy, as well as the laws and empire of the Romans, had eſtabliſhed in their room their own ſuperſtitions and cuſtoms. Having always lived in ſavage liberty, and been conſtantly expoſed to the ſevere hardſhips and dread-

ful uncertainties of ſo precarious a ſtate, they were extremely ſuperſtitious and devoted to prieſts. But, their religion, like moſt of the ancient ſuperſtitions, was of a temper extremely ſocial, and perfectly free from the ſpirit of intolerance; their attachment to it therefore ſoon gave way to the induſtry and zeal of the chriſtians.

Having regarded the Pagan prieſthood with the utmoſt veneration, they eaſily transferred their reverence to the miniſters of their new religion. Is it a wonder that they ſhould convert it to their own advantage?

They ſtill retained ſome remains of the wiſdom of ancient Rome. Their wiſdom, therefore, ſurpaſſed the wiſdom of their barbarous converts; and they eaſily eſtabliſhed upon their religious

ligious diſpoſitions, by the favourable concurrence of ſeveral circumſtances, that enormous religious authority which has ſince controuled and aſtoniſhed the world. The love of power is congenial with the human heart; and this conduct of the prieſthood can never ſurprize us:—religion had erected ſimilar empires in more remote antiquity—the Ægyptian, the Perſian, the Druid, the Bramin ſuperſtitions.

But, notwithſtanding the ſuperior wiſdom of the Chriſtian clergy might lay the foundations of their empire upon the religious diſpoſition of the Germans, it is certain, that it could never have arrived at its full maturity, without a continued ſeries of favourable circumſtances, which aroſe from the general condition of Europe. Then

every country was poor and desolate. Ages were requisite to repair the destructive effects of gothic barbarity. Industry had as yet furnished no subsistence for a numerous population, nor diffused the national riches among the inferior ranks of society: nor could commerce give rise to general sentiments of freedom through the means of general intercourse. It could neither oppose the progress of superstition, nor inspire the generous love of equal and regular laws. On the contrary, the people were scattered about in wretched villages, labouring, by unskilful means, to raise a scanty subsistence from an uncultivated soil; and exposed to the hardships and miseries of a barbarous state of society; successively wasted by famine

famine and peſtilence, by lawleſs banditti, and beaſts of prey; without ſkill to prevent or remedy thoſe various afflictions to which human life is expoſed; and without laws that could reſtrain the hand of violence and oppreſſion.

Diſſatisfied with the preſent, the people derived their whole conſolation from the expectations of futurity. In this ſituation of Europe, nothing could prevent the progreſs of ſuperſtition. Learning was in the hands of the clergy: the great body of the people were conſtantly engaged in the ſervile employments of life; and all the higher orders in defending their country againſt foreign invaſions.

Having more on their hands than they could eaſily perform, and their

occupations and habits of life rendering them unfit for the calmer purſuits of learning and philoſophy, they quietly permitted the clergy to engroſs all the learned profeſſions. The governments then eſtabliſhed in Europe were calculated chiefly to oppoſe invaders; but their internal regulations for the preſervation of peace and order were rudely contrived. Indeed, the relations and connections of men, as well as the modes of property, were ſo ſimple and few, that there was no opportunity to acquire that general experience, and profound acquaintance with human nature, whence every improvement reſults in religion and morals.

The people and nobility, thus employed, could never diſcover the relation

lation of man to God, and of man to man; nor trace the religious and moral obligations arising from those relations. These difficult questions were all referred to the clergy, who explained them from divine revelation, instead of deducing them by a rational chain of arguments from the nature of things.

These were the times which promoted the interests of priestcraft. But, how different from the present situation of Europe! There is none but will judge for himself in the present age.

We never fly to the clergy with cases of conscience. Why then should we dread the encroachments of Popery? Even our virtuous and learned clergy would labour to prevent its

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fatal progreſs, and pernicious effects. They equally deteſt a ſlaviſh and abject ſuperſtition with the reſt of the nation; which is evident from their valuable writings, which are replete with ſound and rational learning, as well as a generous and true philoſophy.

But, the moderation and indifference of the people, and the generous ſentiments of our clergy, are not our only defence againſt the encroachments of ſuperſtition and prieſtcraft. We may venture to reſt our ſecurity upon the toleration of Proteſtant Diſſenters. Though the founders of every ſect have always been wild enthuſiaſts, they have vigorouſly ſupported the intereſts of liberty; they have ſhaken many an eſtabliſhed prejudice; expoſed

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the haughty claims of the clergy; and, indeed, carried to the higheſt perfection many virtues neglected or unknown before.

When the heat of enthuſiaſm abates; when they are no longer inflamed with oppoſition or perſecution; and when their admirers have raiſed an eſtabliſhed fund to ſupport their opinions, the Diſſenters become reſpectable for their learning and virtue. It is true, they will ever oppoſe the eſtabliſhed opinions of the national church, and diſpute the rights and pretenſions of the clergy. This muſt ariſe from their oppoſite intereſts, and their different views of ſociety. As the eſtabliſhed clergy will always favour monarchies, the Diſſenters will always favour republics. The wealth and importance

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of the latter being derived from the contributions and countenance of a free people, as thoſe of the former are derived from the monarch, the view of the one is the preſervation of the ancient conſtitution, and long-eſtabliſhed forms; and that of the other, improvement and freedom; while they are both, as bodies, equally ſwayed by intereſt. We muſt therefore conclude them to be equally uſeful in our mixed conſtitution, where monarchy and republic are ſo happily blended together. Independence may render the eſtabliſhed clergy careleſs and inattentive to their profeſſional duty;—the progreſs and ſucceſs of the Diſſenters will excite them to renew their former application.

Emulation muſt ever animate human

man exertion. The veneration of the people may excite the ſpiritual pride of the clergy. Should it riſe to a conſpicuous height, the Diſſenters will expoſe them to public deriſion.

The veneration of the people for long-eſtabliſhed opinions and forms of public worſhip; their awe of ancient power, exerciſed in the ſacred gloom of religion, may encourage the ambition of the clergy to advance new pretenſions, inconſiſtent with our civil and religious freedom. While others, for want of leiſure, or immediate intereſt, overlook their encroachments, their claims will be ſtrictly examined, and their inſidious conduct expoſed to the world, by the watchful Diſſenters. Thus they have always been the moſt ſtrenuous defenders of national freedom.

dom. While liberty remains a public bleſſing, we muſt look upon religious toleration as a meaſure highly conducive to the general intereſt.

And, while the perfection of our free conſtitution ariſes from the oppoſite intereſts of various orders of men, qualified by their knowledge and opulence to influence the multitude, it is the intereſt of the public to ſupport our ancient religious conſtitution, and to indulge the Diſſenters with an univerſal toleration of their religious opinions. The attachment of the former to ancient forms will afford our conſtitution the neceſſary degree of ſtability; while that ſpirit of innovation, which is natural to the latter, will introduce all neceſſary improvements, and prevent thoſe fatal effects,

effects, which are ſuppoſed to proceed, in every age, from the gloomy ſuperſtitions of Popery.

Now, we may ſafely conclude from the foregoing obſervations on the ſituation of Europe, and the natural effects of univerſal toleration, that religious and civil freedom has nothing to fear from the indulgence which the government has lately ſhewn its Roman catholic ſubjects.

THE END.